

The glorious water-carrier: Stesichorus' *Sack of Troy*

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Much ancient literature is lost, but new texts – often written on fragmentary Egyptian papyrus documents – do still await discovery. Here Patrick Finglass looks at a recent find which gives us a new account of the most famous Greek story of all, the fall of Troy.

The sack of Troy was one of the major themes of ancient Greek song. That famous night, full of acts of notorious violence and cruelty, provided bards with some of their most memorable poetry. Yet very little of this remains. An ancient epic called the *Sack of Troy* survives only in a later summary and a few fragments. The *Iliad* anticipates the sack, but finishes before the city is taken; the *Odyssey* looks back on the sack and describes it, but only briefly. Greek tragedy is interested in the aftermath of Troy's fall (think of Euripides' *Hecuba* and *Trojan Women*), but not the events of the dramatic night itself, which would have been hard to depict on stage. For a complete surviving narrative of the major achievement of the age of the Greek heroes, we have to wait for a Latin poet, Virgil, in the second book of his *Aeneid*. Here Aeneas, a guest at a banquet in Dido's Carthage, narrates the tale of the city's fall and gives us many of the details that are now so familiar – the wooden horse, the deception of the Greek agent Sinon, the punishment of Laocoön, and the apparition of Hector to Aeneas in a dream. All these details come to us from a Roman, not a Greek, poet.

Piecing together a new source

Recently, however, the painstaking labours of classical scholars have managed to recover the beginning of a *Sack of Troy* by the Greek poet Stesichorus. Stesichorus was from Himera in Sicily and probably lived in the first half of the sixth century B.C.; his impressive name means 'He who sets up the chorus', which probably reflects how his poems were performed. His works were popular in antiquity – the Roman critic Quintilian wrote that he 'supported on his lyre the weight of epic song' – but were lost in about the third century A.D. Over recent decades, however, fragments of his lyrics have been discovered on

ancient manuscripts (written on a sort of paper made from the dried stalks of the Egyptian papyrus plant, and so often called just 'papyri'), which have allowed us to recover all kinds of vivid poetry from oblivion – Heracles' battle with the three-headed monster Geryon; Oedipus' wife begging his sons Eteocles and Polynices not to fight each other; the build-up to the hunt of the monstrous Calydonian boar. Among these discoveries, as mentioned above, is a fragment from the beginning of his *Sack of Troy*. The fragment was originally four separate fragments when the papyrus was first published in 1967; only recently, after many failed attempts at connection, have they been put together, and joined with a quotation of Stesichorus' poem in the Roman writer Athenaeus, to produce a substantial and fascinating text, which has the additional interest of clearly coming from the very opening of the work. The first six lines are missing, and probably contained an address to a Muse. After that we read the following (N.B. text in brackets indicates gaps in the papyrus; not all the restorations are certain, but the overall sense is clear):

Goddess, give me a lovely [prelude], golden[-haired] maiden, [for my heart leaps] and desires to sing. Come now, tell me how by the eddies of the fair[-flowing] Simoeis a man learned measurements and wisdom by the will of the revered goddess [Athena], and, [trusting in these] instead of battle that breaks men and conflict, won glory because he brought to pass spacious Troy's day of capture [without the use of armies]. [On him Pallas in her generosity bestowed a kindness that put an end to his labours.] For the daughter of Zeus pitied him as he continuously carried water for the lordly sons of Atreus.

Playing with the reader: who is this about?

Stesichorus teases his audience from the start as they wonder what this poem is about. The reference to the Simoeis, one of the rivers of Troy, tells them that it is set at that city and so has something to do with the war. The audience then hear about a man who knows wisdom and is favoured by the goddess Athena (there is a gap in the papyrus where her name is, but the metre makes it certain that her name stood there). Could this be Odysseus? Athena is famously his patron – when he wins the foot-race in *Iliad* 23, the lesser Ajax complains that she always helps him, as if she was his mother. But Athena helps other heroes too. And the audience may doubt that Odysseus is the subject when they hear that he trusted in wisdom 'instead of battle that breaks men and conflict' – whatever his portrayal in later literature, Odysseus is no mean fighter in early Greek poetry, where he uses both brawn and brain, not just the latter. These doubts will be confirmed when the audience hears that the figure carried water for the sons of Atreus (Agamemnon and Menelaus, the leaders of the Greek expedition) – a task for a servant, not for a noble warrior such as Odysseus. But who in that case is the person that Stesichorus describes?

The answer is Epeius, the builder of the famous Wooden Horse, the man who can truly be said to have 'won glory because he brought to pass spacious Troy's day of capture without the use of armies'. It turns out that the reference to his knowing 'measurements and wisdom' is a literal reference to the measurements involved in crafting this tool of deception. Epeius appears in the *Iliad* as a champion boxer in Patroclus' funeral games; confident in his boxing ability, he nevertheless admits that he is not much of a fighter, cheerfully telling the assembled troops that 'no-one can be good at everything'. His role as the builder of the Horse is first found in the *Odyssey*, although he only gets two brief mentions there. He may have made the Horse, but it seems that it was Odysseus' idea: Troy was captured 'thanks to Odysseus' plan', Athena says in that poem.

An unusual hero

Stesichorus' gradual revelation of Epeius' identity keeps the listeners' interest: he uses his rather wordy style to generate suspense. But by playing with the audience's expectations, the poet also highlights his unusual decision to begin with a relatively unimportant figure. Whereas the *Iliad* poet had confined Epeius to a single episode near the end of his work, and the *Odyssey* poet had relegated him to a couple of colourless relative clauses ('the Horse, which Epeius built'), Stesichorus puts him right at the opening of his work. This is all the more remarkable because he emphasizes the menial nature of his occupation. An ancient Greek audience, acutely sensitive to social distinctions and to the sort of characters who were appropriate to feature in high poetry, would have been shocked at the prominence given to him. Stesichorus' Epeius is no fighter, or even a boxer – he is a mere water-carrier. This labour is not only deeply unheroic (epic poems aren't usually written about people in the drink distribution industry) – it is also unmanly. As one scholar has put it, 'fetching water was one of the stereotypical female occupations – portraying males fetching water was considered inappropriate'. We see this in Greek art: from the famous frescoes of Minoan Thera to the vases of the classical period, the people fetching water from springs are always women. We see this in literature too, which often refers to women, never to men, on their way to the well. So for Epeius to have water-carrying as his day-to-day activity was demeaning to him as a warrior and as a man.

My subject is war, and the pity of war. The poetry is in the pity.

Beginning a poem on the sack of Troy with the lowly Epeius, and making him responsible for the plan to capture the city, are bold moves on Stesichorus' part designed to make his poetry stand out against the familiar background of epic. But what of Athena? She is said to pity Epeius because of his daily occupation; in the section of the poem that came after our fragment, she will have stimulated him to devise the scheme involving the Wooden Horse and to suggest it to the kings. (Her involvement in no way lessens Epeius' glory; great deeds in the ancient world were imagined to be the result of divine and human action working together.) This pity is a paradox: on the one hand it is a touching reaction to Epeius' plight, yet on the other it turns out to be the emotion that leads to the destruction of Troy, and all the misery caused by that event – misery a good deal more serious than what Epeius has to put up with. Athena's pity may be motivated less by affection for Epeius, and

more by her hatred for the Trojans and desire to see them suffer.

Stesichorus is reapplying and transforming a motif used at the start of the *Iliad*, where Hera sends Athena to prompt Achilles to summon the Greeks to assembly because of the plague that is afflicting them; the poet tells us that 'she cared for the Danaans, as she saw them dying'. Yet this touching display of concern leads to the assembly in which Agamemnon and Achilles have their quarrel, which itself causes the 'countless deaths' of Achaeans mentioned in the proem. So too, Athena's pity in Stesichorus will have fatal consequences – this time for the Trojans. She pities a single individual, and uses that pity as a means of accomplishing perhaps the most pitiless act in the whole of Greek myth. Stesichorus thus forces his audience to confront the capricious nature of the gods who rule the universe and the questionable motives that their actions can have.

In the space of a few lines, then, Stesichorus takes a familiar poetic theme and gives it a strikingly innovative beginning. We see the transformative power of his verse, which turns a lowly water-carrier into a glorious hero, and the usually generous emotion of pity into a weapon of mass destruction. If he could do all this in a few lines, imagine what he could have done in a whole poem. Let's hope that one day, thanks to the treasures still lying in the sands of Egypt, we will have a chance to find out.

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